



Standard 9: Content for Special Education

What consumers need to know about teacher preparation

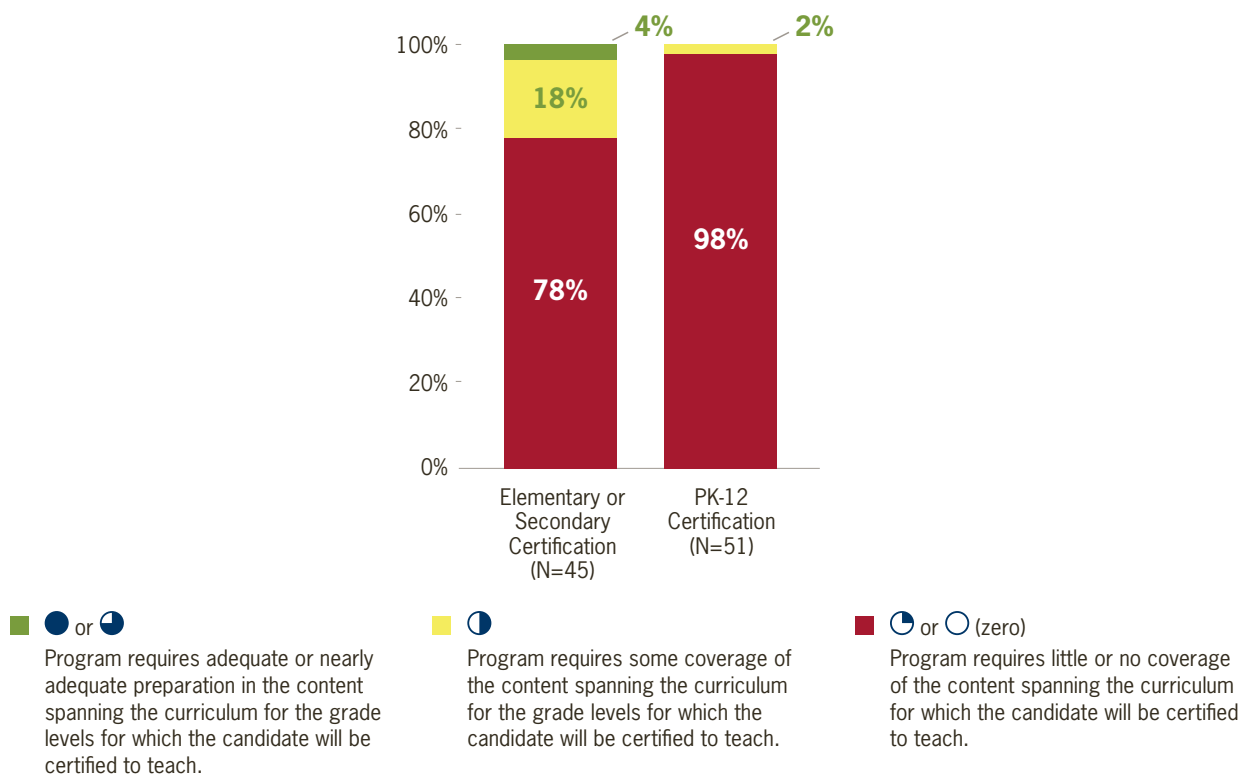
To learn more about how programs are scored on this standard, including how individual indicators are satisfied, please see its [scoring methodology](#).

Students with special needs must be able to access the PK-12 curriculum. It is not sufficient for special education teachers to have training in special education pedagogy; they must also have content knowledge sufficient to teach their assigned grade levels.

State regulation in this area is particularly germane. Because states certify special education teachers for elementary grades, secondary grades or a combination of the two, the analysis for this standard is first conditioned on the state context and then addresses program requirements at the undergraduate and graduate levels. If special education teachers are certified to teach in elementary grades only, we determine whether teacher candidates will have a sufficient breadth of subject knowledge (Standard 6). If special education teachers are certified to teach at the secondary level, we look to see if teacher candidates will have focused content preparation similar to that which we look for multiple-subject middle school certification (Standard 7). And if special education teachers are certified to teach the full span of grades, PK-12, we assess whether content preparation matches what elementary *and* multiple-subject certified middle school teachers need (Standards 6 *and* 7).

Overview

Distribution of scores on Std. 9: Content for Special Education
(N=96 special education programs)



Sample for this standard

The sample for this standard comprises all of the special education programs selected for evaluation that are confirmed to offer initial certification. (For more information about the selection of the sample, please see the [appendix to the General Methodology](#).)

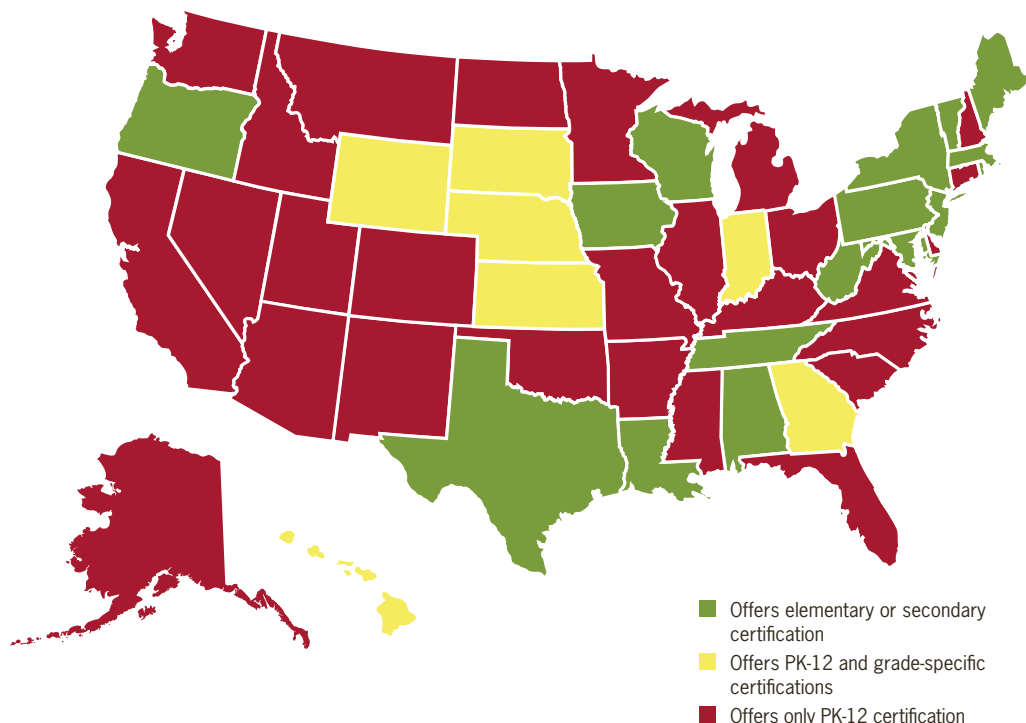
Because of the substantially different distributions of scores found across programs that offer elementary or secondary certification and those that offer PK-12 certification, findings are reported separately for the two types of programs.

What are common reasons that programs do not meet the Content for Special Education Standard?

- *Undergraduate general education requirements are too broad to ensure adequate content preparation for the elementary classroom.* Undergraduate general education requirements give both elementary and special education teacher candidates insufficient guidance as to appropriate coursework.
- *Graduate programs fail to require or specify undergraduate content area coverage for applicants.* As is true in elementary and secondary teacher preparation programs, transcript review forms and admissions standards for graduate special education programs rarely mandate areas in which the candidate must have content preparation.
- *Programs preparing special education teacher candidates for a PK-12 license do not require sufficient content preparation to adequately prepare candidates to teach across all grades.* While we acknowledge that a PK-12 certification structure makes it more difficult for programs to meet the standard, the fact remains that most programs content preparation requirements fall far short of what their candidates need to succeed.

The state context for evaluation of the Content for Special Education Standard

Consideration of the grade span for which special education teachers are certified to teach is central in evaluating the adequacy of their content preparation. For that reason, the report that follows is divided into three sections, reflecting the three different ways states structure special education certification.



- 1) Findings for programs in states shown in **green** on the map above: Special education teacher candidates in these states are certified to teach either the elementary or the secondary grades.
- 2) Findings for programs in states shown in **gold** on the map above: These states offer elementary, secondary and PK-12 special education certifications; each IHE determines the type(s) of programs it will offer.
- 3) Findings for programs in states shown in **red** on the map above: In these states, special education teacher candidates are certified to teach across all PK-12 grades.

The sample of programs we evaluate for this standard is too small to enable a comparison of the differences between undergraduate and graduate programs — which can be considerable in content preparation — in each of these categories of states.

More information on special education content preparation

States offering either elementary or secondary certification

(N=18 elementary programs rated in states offering these certifications)

(N=5 secondary programs rated in states offering these certifications)

Overall, the ratings for elementary-focused programs addressed by this standard are lower than the ratings for elementary programs on the **Elementary Content Standard**. No elementary-focused program meets the standard, and 50 percent earn a score of zero. Elementary-focused programs generally fail to require that teacher candidates take sufficient coursework in the sciences, with 63 percent of programs evaluated not requiring a single science course. Elementary-focused programs do require slightly stronger coverage of history and geography compared to their coverage of the sciences, with 50 percent requiring at least one course in this area. Eight-five percent of elementary-focused programs also require that candidates take at least one literature and composition course.

Of the five special education programs focused on secondary preparation that are evaluated, only one requires teacher candidates to earn even one content-area minor in a teachable subject, when at least two such minors would be the minimum amount of content preparation suitable for the secondary classroom.

More information on special education content preparation

States offering both PK-12 and grade-specific certification

(N=10 elementary programs rated in states offering these certifications)

(N=0 secondary programs rated in states offering these certifications)

(N=7 PK-12 programs rated in states offering these certifications)

In the three subject areas we focus on in our analysis of elementary content preparation — literature and composition, history and geography and the sciences — 20 percent of the elementary-focused programs evaluated have adequate requirements in two areas and nearly adequate requirements in a third. The remaining 80 percent of the elementary-focused programs evaluated fail to have sufficient requirements in any subject area.

The following IHEs have chosen to offer PK-12 special education programs when they are located in states in which they could instead offer elementary-focused and/or secondary-focused programs. As discussed in the [rationale](#) for this standard, these programs' insistence on doing so ultimately shortchanges the special education students whom their graduates will teach.

Undergraduate PK-12 special education program offered:

- **Jackson State University** (MS)
- **University of Southern Mississippi**

Graduate PK-12 special education program offered:

- **Indiana University – Bloomington**
- **University of Kansas**
- **University of Nebraska – Lincoln**
- **University of North Dakota**
- **Valdosta State University** (GA)

More information on special education content preparation

States offering only PK-12 certification

(N=56 PK-12 programs rated in states offering these certifications)¹

Given how difficult it would be to require the depth and breadth of coursework needed to teach over a 13-year grade span with any degree of competence, it is not surprising that we find that special education programs preparing teacher candidates to teach in grades PK-12 provide poor content preparation. Although some programs require a minimal amount of elementary content coursework, none require even one of the two content-area minors that would equip a special education teacher to teach or co-teach secondary students.

- ✓+ The following programs are located in states that only certify special education teachers for grades PK-12, but they commendably require candidates to earn elementary or secondary endorsements as well, signaling to school districts that these candidates' training best suits them for a specific grade span. These programs are evaluated for content preparation only in the relevant grade span:

Arizona State University, Eastern Kentucky University, Elon University (NC), Keene State College (NH), Midway College (KY), Montana State University Billings, Murray State University (KY), Northern Arizona University, the University of Delaware, the University of Florida, the University of Idaho and the University of Washington – Tacoma.

Unfortunately, despite these programs' rejection of poorly structured state certification requirements, almost all earned a score of zero on the standard. Simply signaling that candidates are being prepared for the elementary or secondary grades rather than for grades PK-12 is not sufficient; programs must ensure that candidates receive the appropriate content preparation that will equip them for the classroom.

¹ Because some programs in these states choose to offer only certifications for a more limited grade span, the number of total programs in states offering only a PK-12 certification is greater than the number of programs that actually do offer this certification.



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